

Undergraduate Education Studies students' experiences of applying for post-graduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes in 2015/16

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Introduction

In late June 2015, the National College of Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) announced that they would be replacing individual provider allocations with national quotas for places on primary and secondary initial teacher education (ITE) courses beginning in September 2016. As lecturers on a large undergraduate programme where around 65% of graduates progress to ITE each year, it did not take long for us to perceive the impact of this change on the experiences of our final year students. In our anecdotal view, the application process in 2015/16 appeared to be characterised as a 'race' to secure an ITE place amid rumours of courses recruiting quickly and closing early. Some comments in the professional literature appeared to echo our perceptions:

We are concerned that the current approach to the distribution of places for teacher training programmes does not provide sufficient stability for prospective students or providers. In the absence of the kind of allocations system which existed in previous years, there is a great deal more uncertainty about how and where places will be made available (Katharine Vincent, Programme Leader for the Secondary PGCE, UCL Institute of Education, speaking in November 2015 and quoted in Scott, 2015b: online).

This change in policy has occurred at a time of more general concerns about the decline and closure of 'traditional' university-based PGCE courses and the rise of school-based routes in an increasingly fragmented ITE landscape.

Against this backdrop, and in response to mooted suggestions for a new system next year, this research is intended to generate a robust assessment of the 2015-16 recruitment cycle. We are seeking to understand the impacts of this policy change both from the perspective of the applicants (drawn from amongst our own final year undergraduate Education Studies students at De Montfort University) and from the perspective of providers.

Today's 'Read and Review' session

We aim to use today's session as a chance to gain an understanding of ITE providers' experiences of the 2015-16 recruitment cycle. In doing so, we are adopting a similar methodology as previous ITE research project in which one of the two authors was involved

(Welch *et al*, 2011). In return, we hope that the preliminary findings presented will provide much for Teacher Educators to consider. We hope to offer indications of how different types of provision are viewed by prospective applicants and how those perceptions interact with the on-the-ground process of choosing and meeting representatives of providers.

As outlined in our Participant Information Sheet, we are asking those present at this read and review session whether they would be prepared for their comments to be used (entirely anonymously) as a primary data source within our research.

Agreement will be required from all those present for this session to be used for the collection of primary data. Should anyone present not wish for the session to be used in this way, no audio or handwritten transcripts of participants' comments will be made and, instead, the session will be used as a general opportunity for peer review of the presented materials.

Please refer to our Participant Information Sheet for more information.

Participants and methodology

All current final year BA Education Studies students at De Montfort University (N=139) have been invited to participate in focus group discussions about the process of applying and attending interview events for Primary and Secondary school ITE courses. This paper offers selected findings from a preliminary analysis of data from the first three focus group discussions undertaken during April 2016 (n=8). Focus groups will continue to be held for several more weeks, and it is hoped that the passing of final coursework deadlines will encourage many more students to participate.

Of the eight participants who have so far participated, seven were female and one male. Three were mature students and two (both female) had childcare responsibilities which had impacted on their choice of prospective providers. Six of the participants were White British; the remaining two were from Eastern European and South Asian ethnic backgrounds. Seven of the participants were single honours Education Studies students and had applied for primary ITE. The eighth, a joint arts and education student, had applied for a secondary PGCE in an arts subject. Several participants had extensive previous professional experience of teaching support work in schools. Collectively, participants had applied for university-based, SCITT and School Direct routes and had submitted applications at varying points in the cycle, from the day the UCAS system 'opened' until well after the Christmas period. By the time of the focus groups, six of the participants had been offered places by one or more providers but two had been unsuccessful.

Emerging findings from the applicant focus groups

1. Perceptions of the differences between the ITE routes

All participants had firm initial impressions of the differing ITE routes, and these framed their choice of provider.

University-based PGCEs

These routes were seen as ‘the way it’s always been done’ (successful, male applicant). It tends to be perceived as ‘the most obvious route, the one that most [people] will assume you’ll probably do, and I think teachers do as well’ (successful, SCITT/SD applicant); ‘everyone knows what a PGCE is, but if you turn round to someone and say yeah I’m doing a SCITT you’d have to explain it a bit more’ (successful, female, secondary applicant). At the outset of planning to be a teacher, the university-based PGCE was often seen as ‘what I thought I *had* to do. I didn’t realise there were any other routes until I started this [undergraduate] course. I thought it was the only option’ (successful, male applicant).

The teaching on these courses was initially taken by participants to be based on a lecture format and ‘theory-based’ with less focus on the school placement aspect - although it was also acknowledged that overall the placements on these PGCEs provide similar in-school time as other routes. It was the balance and focus of taught and applied elements that made for the key difference:

‘it’s all applied [on school-based routes], so you’ll be talking about what you did and why, and bringing in theorists rather than being taught it’ (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)

‘[SCITT/School-based routes] ‘it’s learning on the job, sort of being trained while you’re teaching, so you’ve not got to go to university or do assignments or lectures and stuff, you’re based in a school’ (successful, secondary arts PGCE applicant)

The established status, as well as the perceived teaching format, on such university-based PGCEs fed into the general sense that these courses are more academic than the school-based routes and have a certain kudos associated with them:

‘It’s the more traditional route, more academic... and there’s a higher status attached to the [university] PGCE...because it’s more academic and it’s more traditional as well...a more established form of teacher training... and if you want to go to different countries with your teaching as well, it’s more recognised the standard PGCE’ (unsuccessful, mature PGCE applicant)

'But when I went to the [university PGCE] interview, it felt a lot more like, 'it is the prestigious one'. It felt like that, not so much that it made me worry, but it did just feel like... it was more about: 'you need to impress us'. It was that kind of interview where you felt you really had to perform. Whereas the other interviews I went on were more like 'well, you'll all get on if you are good enough'. The university one felt more competitive.'

(successful, male applicant)

In these discussions with Education Studies students there was a definite sense that university-based PGCEs were seen as right for the high-achievers, for the 'clever' students. But for those who have experience in schools and feel they can *hit the ground running*, the University based route is not necessarily the first choice:

'If you enjoy the academic side of things then you're more likely to enjoy a [university] PGCE, whereas I'm just ready to be out of Uni and doing that sort of thing...I've gone for a School Direct because I just want to be in a school and get going' (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)

And the contrast that these school-based routes offer in this respect seems to emphasise some of the negative perceptions of an 'academic' University route:

'...Would our opinions probably not be acceptable or accepted at the university of [X]? There's an opinion that they think they are better than [our university] and they have these set ideas. When you go to their open days, it is very much 'this is who we are, and you've got to assimilate to being like us... When I went to the [X university] open day at the end of Year 2, I came away thinking 'I'm not applying there, they are all snobs'

(successful, mature female School Direct applicant)

SCITT and School Direct

There was general agreement that it was unclear what the differences were between SCITT and School Direct routes,

'I think it's quite bad that we don't know [the difference between SCITT and School Direct]! (successful, secondary arts PGCE applicant)

(re: information on their websites/literature) Some just said 'school based teacher training'. It didn't say SCITT or School Direct – it didn't say those words but also they were all so similar – the wording – you couldn't tell the difference between each one of them' (unsuccessful, female, mature applicant)

'I think the hardest bit is knowing what to apply for. Because it's so hard to distinguish the differences between them, and then you go and talk to them and they obviously tell

you theirs is the best but they can't tell you why it's different and you're left thinking 'well, what is the best one to go for?' (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)

The commonality between these routes (which made them stand apart from University-based PGCEs) was not only their 'school-centred' nature; these school-based options were seen to be a great deal more supportive of trainees, and this compares unfavourably with perceptions of university-based PGCEs as having large numbers of students and a less personalised approach:

'[The university PGCE] is like 500 students where [SCITT/SD] is like 25 - your tutor's focused on you so you got more support' (successful, female applicant)

'...from all the open events I went to I feel the people running the SCITT and the people already doing it were so passionate and welcoming whereas the Uni they take so many students they don't need to make that relationship' (successful, female applicant)

'From my perspective [of the SCITT] I just felt a little more than a 'figure' [a number]... It was more like they cared about my progression as a practitioner, I felt like they wanted to help me become a better teacher.. You didn't have to have 'credentials' to get on the course. It was more about looking at your drive and motivation and once I got the offer, that didn't stop' (successful, male applicant)

'SCITTs, I'd heard, you get more support...from the teachers and the staff, just as a whole you get more support. Because you're working in that environment every single day, my son's head teacher says it makes better teachers' (unsuccessful, mature PGCE applicant)

Perceptions of these routes then feed into notions of what it takes to become a good teacher, and then extends further to employment and career prospects too:

"I found the SCITT really attractive to apply to. They made it sound as though it was something really worth going into. There was more of a chance of me being employed if I went through the SCITT...That's what I picked up from how they made their course sound.' (unsuccessful, female applicant)

It is an intriguing initial line of inquiry that for these students (of BA Education Studies at a post-'92 university), the emergence of school-based routes - which are seen to contrast with 'academic' university-provided PGCEs - operates certain aspects of their fledgeling teacher identities. The notion that you do not necessarily need particular academic ability or qualifications to make a great teacher - just the right personality and a certain way with children - is lent support within the current nexus of ITE provision:

'...you could be a student that gets a first in everything but have no connection with children, have no personality and you'd fly through [on a PGCE interview]'whereas the SCITT and School Direct are looking for more of a personality that they know would fit well with teaching' (unsuccessful, mature PGCE applicant)

'Yeah I feel like my School Direct interview was probably my easiest one because it was less about the academic kind of stuff... that's a lot more about your person rather than your knowledge I suppose' (successful, secondary arts PGCE applicant)

'I'd say [as advice to providers] look at personalities and abilities rather than focusing so much on grades. The only reason they said I needed a Master's was because I only got C's in my GCSE.... I'd make an excellent teacher if they gave me that chance rather than just looking at the C's I got 15 years ago' (unsuccessful, female, mature applicant)

2. Changing perceptions as students engaged with providers and the application process

These ideas are often echoed within the participants' accounts of attending interviews, where initial opinions and perceptions are sometimes changed and sometimes hardened. For example it was often at the University PGCE interviews that associations of 'prestigious' turned to 'pressurised' or 'pretentious':

'And then [my opinion about University of Y] changed because I went there thinking this is a really good Uni, this is a good place to get, and then I came out and I was like no, not a chance....I came out feeling scared and pressured, a bit like a number' (successful, secondary arts PGCE applicant)

'...I kind of view[ed] the SCITT as kind of like a cop-out kind of route, but now I've applied for [a University-based PGCE] I didn't like it and when I reapply again I'll go for a SCITT. I found [the PGCE provider] very pretentious... just the whole environment...[at the interview] everyone's sitting there... this lady was like 'no talking' and it was like being in private school...no opportunity to get your personality across – it was just very like academic focused: Maths test, English test..' (unsuccessful, mature PGCE applicant)

In selection event scenarios where many interviewees were in attendance, some applicants felt the interview/selection processes were more about 'screening people out' within the University route; the criticism that they were just made to feel 'like a number' was common.

However it is important to note that there were some similar experiences reported by those attending SCITT interview events. The initial positivity about the benefits of that route was sometimes dampened by the high-numbers approach to the interview process:

‘...out of my choices, the SCITT was the one I was initially like ‘that’ll be good’, it was in small schools where I live and stuff, and then when I met the people – cos you have the ‘exam interview’ first – and when you saw people coming in, people going out – I was like ‘I don’t know if I do want this as much as I thought’.... just the fact that they were interviewing so many people on one day; people were literally taking the test, giving them back in and then someone else would come and sit in their chair, just kept coming in and out’ (successful, SCITT/SD applicant).

‘[This particular] SCITT, I went to see them twice during the open [day] events; they said how much they care about the interview process and the discussion, and when I went to the first part of the interview and there were so many people and we had this discussion but you could only answer one [question]... they had too many numbers...they were saying how much they care and how it was going to be beautiful and they were going to listen, and then [you just had] one answer’ (successful, female applicant)

In a marked contrast, some applicants who had experienced both SCITT and School Direct interview events considered the School Direct approach to be their ideal - again noticeably fuelled by negativity towards the ‘screening’ of applicants at larger events and influenced by the ‘personal/personality’ focus that such applicants crave:

‘...When you turned up [at the School Direct interview day], just from speaking to you over email [beforehand] they knew your names which I thought straight off is a nice thing to do – you walked in, they knew everyone’s names, they knew a little bit about you already which I just thought ‘how good is that’, and it makes you feel at ease. I think encouraging as well, because if they know your name then they obviously have thought of you a bit more than like being a number’ (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)

And yet interviewing for a School Direct place was not a universally positive experience. One applicant was surprised to find that following successful initial interviews with these providers, they were required to undergo exactly the same interview/selection processes at the accrediting university as those applicants who had applied directly to the university. As such, the applicant felt that the university ‘did not care’ which route they had applied for and treated them all the same way. There is again a tangible sense here of applicants baulking when they feel treated like ‘just a number’ and when the process they’re entangled in is opaque.

3. Shifting power differential between applicants and provider

An early concern expressed following the NCTL’s change of policy was that the new model of place allocations, combined with a growing number of school-based providers, would see the ‘transfer of teacher supply to several thousand competing small businesses’ (Chris Husbands, then of the UCL Institute of Education, quoted in Scott, 2015: online). Evidence from our focus groups suggested that applicants were typically very aware that there could be commercial

implications for their choice of providers. Several explained that they had felt they were being 'sold to' when attending open days:

They're always going to give you their best stats... they're going to tell you that 'we the best in such and such field'...It made me feel like a customer but that's because I used to work in sales and I know all of their tricks (unsuccessful, female, mature applicant).

In at least one case, a participant felt that questionable competitive tactics were being used by a provider. In a bid to have her accept their offer of a place quickly, this participant told us that a university provider had 'lied' to her regarding the imminent closure of her secondary subject¹:

I think from my experience, [University X] was really encouraging and really welcoming about it, but then [University Y] rang me and they said something like 'you need to let us know as soon as possible because the Government have capped down on places for [this subject]' and I thought 'no they've not, you can't lie to me to make me make my decision' and that kind of influenced my decision, I didn't pick those in the end, because I just thought why do I want to go somewhere where I'm being made to feel like I'm being rushed about it (successful, secondary arts PGCE applicant)

Whilst some expressed cynicism at this approach, others accepted that this marketing was an inevitable outcome of the recent changes to ITE recruitment:

Obviously it was about them selling it to me, I understand that. When I got my offer, they sent me their 'Outstanding' Ofsted report... They sent me a letter... it wasn't just an offer on UCAS, it was a letter. And it said 'we were really excited by what we saw, we saw great potential and would love to work with you. So as much as it was marketing in a sense, it was very personal - well I hope it was personal! [laughing] (successful, male applicant talking about his experiences of a SCITT application).

Other participants held similar beliefs that school-based providers wished to be seen to offer a more 'personal touch' within their recruitment processes. As noted above, a common perception was that these providers emphasised their smaller size and close links with school personnel in order to convey an image of a tightly-knit, pastoral 'community' that was reflexive to applicants' needs and aspirations. Nonetheless, some participants reported being 'realistic' about the level of support and flexibility that might be ultimately available, should they accept an offer with a school-based provider:

[The SCITT open day presenter said] 'we know every single person's name' and one of the students who actually did the course last year [was there] and said [actually] you called me a different name for two months, and he was quite unhappy with her. He had

¹ Upon checking, we discovered that this particular subject did not close for HEI applicants until well over a month after this participant's interviews, suggesting that her assertion was likely to be broadly accurate.

said 'we're the best, we're like a family and we treat everyone like our children' (successful, female applicant).

The way they are running now, it is just another PGCE, but in a school in a group. Somebody's getting a wage out of it and people are getting funding out of it. But it's dressed up as something different and they masquerade that you will be given choice and be part of the group. Actually, you are not... When you go to the interviews you are sold this package of: 'yeah, as soon as you are ready you can come in and be part of our team'. But you're not, actually. 'You'll be consulted, you'll be asked', but, no, you won't (successful, female School Direct applicant).

This last comment reflected a view, expressed by around a third of the participants, that whilst they initially had 'power' as applicants, free to choose their three target providers, this power quickly shifted to the provider once they had made a firm acceptance of an offer. Moreover, once this shift in the balance of power had occurred, providers were sometimes perceived as less willing to 'personalise' their programmes in ways that might have been understood to have been implied at open days. For instance, initial paperwork and discussions at interview had suggested to one School Direct participant that she would be able to make choices about which schools she could train within, becoming a 'genuine' part of that school's team. In the event, once she had agreed to train with a particular provider, she felt that notions of choice and team involvement dissolved:

I sent an email with my preference of schools like I was asked, and got one back 'I'm a bit busy at the moment, let me know after Easter' (successful, female School Direct applicant).

This realisation was part of a broader consensus amongst participants that the oft-publicised differences between various university- and school-routes were, in reality, far less pronounced.

In my experience of what's happening in School Direct, I don't think there is much difference [with university based programmes], to be quite honest... For me now, there is no difference.... [I thought at first] If I do it through School Direct, I'll be less 'under the thumb'. But it turns out there isn't much difference. [It was as though] 'once we've got you, we don't have to make the effort any more. We've filled our quota'. It's left a feeling of bitterness really (successful, mature female School Direct applicant).

Working conclusion

The purpose of this Read and Review session was to introduce our research and some of the pertinent themes it has so far uncovered. We have indicated the strength of impressions that these students have about university-based PGCE routes and that these are sometimes considered negatively when compared with 'school-based' options. Whilst the differences

between SCITTs and School Direct routes are very unclear, these types of providers are seen as suitable for these applicants since their practice-based (less 'academic') associations seem to articulate with these students' fledgeling teacher identities. In participants' reports of their interactions with providers during the application and interview process, these impressions are modified to some extent and it is noticeable that feeling 'like a number' within a less-than-transparent process is anathema to these applicants. As offers of places are received, considered and accepted some participants in our research describe particularly unexpected and disliked experiences which often lead to the realisation that, ultimately, they represent consumers to be sold to within a marketised system.

It is important to note that these are preliminary findings, and that the data collection and analysis processes are ongoing. Once complete, our findings will be submitted for publication in appropriate journal/s. We would also be very keen to keep in touch with Read and Review participants in order to update them on our progress. Please do let us know if you would like us to stay in touch with you.

References

- Scott, S. (2015a). 'Teacher training changes will pit providers against each other', *Schools Week*, 23 June [Retrieved on 4 May 2016 from: <http://schoolsweek.co.uk/nctl-registration-changes-pit-teacher-training-providers-against-each-other/>].
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- Welch, G. Purves, R., Hargreaves, D., & Marshall, N. (2011). 'Early career challenges in secondary school music teaching', *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(2).

Annex - additional qualitative data for discussion if time

- **Exploring how difficult it all was and why (better qualifications than us, people not just straight out of Uni)**
 - 'Yeah massively intense, and I had 4 interviews in 4 days like one after the other and by the last one I was, you know you're not performing your best but, they tire you out don't they. You come home like 'oh my god'. And I think, a bit intense' (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)
 - 'I think there's still a big demand for teachers but I think because obviously with more people going to university I think now, and then a lot more people are actually going into teaching, like you hear a lot of people – and it really annoys me – when people do a degree and then they go 'oh I'll just do a PGCE' and it's a bit like you can't just go and do a PGCE. People that don't know about education just think it's like the easy route, and it's quite funny when we can sit back and go well it's not, oh this is really hard. But yeah I think there is a lot more competition now'. (successful, secondary arts PGCE applicant)
 - 'I think as well it's probably because they know so many teachers are quitting so quickly that they probably make it more rigorous so the (weaker? Inaudible) probably leave quicker' (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)
 - 'I was really surprised, I thought that everyone at the interview would be in the same position as us; last year at uni, wanting to teach. There was people there with Master's degrees, PhDs, there was a lot of people that had already got their degree and I sat there and thought 'how naïve am I!' You know I thought I'm going to pop off to this interview, I'm gonna get it and then I'm gonna decide if I wanna take it or not. I obviously didn't get it but I felt that there was so many people there with better degrees than myself...' (unsuccessful, mature PGCE applicant)
 - '...There was loads of people that were having a complete change of career as well, like at mine there was someone who was a qualified dietician and she was switching to be a primary school teacher... *[interjection from other participant – 'and older people as well, did you get that?']*...Yeah yeah, you felt like there wasn't many people coming straight out of Uni, that we were like...' (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)
 - 'I had 4 interviews in 4 days, they all wanted me to prep something different – I had a presentation, a workshop, a lesson plan, and just to know where I'm going and on what day, so it's probably like 3 weeks out of the year where I didn't do any uni work whatsoever, or think about anything else... The timetables of the interviews was ridiculous' (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)
 - They definitely wanted people with experience. They wanted people who had been at school. They wanted to know how many hours, days and then they were interested in you, just based on that (successful, female applicant)
 - There was one interview I went to and at the feedback from that – all through I thought it had been an excellent interview and she was very positive about me and when I didn't get in I asked for feedback and I was told all the other 20 people worked in school or had Masters and my education wasn't high enough even when I got my degree (unsuccessful, female, mature applicant)
- **How the stress put some people off, and didn't need to be like that**
 - 'They make out how it's all over-subscribed and they can chuck away people if they want but obviously you know they're screaming out for teachers and they're always advertising for me, so I don't know whether they put some people off maybe by being...' (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)
 - 'Loads of people are taking gap years because they can't be bothered to deal with going into teaching straight after the degree' (successful, SCITT/SD applicant)
 - 'My friend said to me – and it's weird because she's very been adamant and she gets things done doesn't she – and she surprised me, she was like I'm taking a year out, I don't want to go through my third year with the stress of doing teacher training application and interviews. So from what she said, she doesn't want the

stress of it alongside your third year – she viewed it as being very inhibiting; rather focus on getting the degree.’ (successful, secondary arts PGCE applicant)

- At my last interview they didn’t get round to emailing me till the night before my interview and I had to do a maths and English exam on line that night. I had to prepare a presentation and prepare a 20 minute lesson and then discussion points. That was the hardest interview – even if I had a week. All of those things together – that was the hardest thing I had to do (unsuccessful, female, mature applicant)
- What I heard was this year they (unclear) very soon and there was panic. But it was better for me to have it sorted in November so I could concentrate on my Uni work. I don’t have that stress as it’s all sorted and done...It was extremely stressful. I don’t have a stress about it now. I do have stress about Uni work. To me it was kind of perfect. I was ever so early (successful, female applicant)
- For me it seemed to fall when our first assignments were due and the actual getting the application off and references and personal statements was easy. But then the interviews kept coming round and you had to prepare for this or this. I was focusing more on that than the assignments. Everything got pushed back for these interviews (unsuccessful, female, mature applicant)
- It was almost like a race. People were panicking (unclear). I think the most stressful thing was that you had to complete your form and then wait for your references. You can’t do anything till you wait. Some of my referees were within 2 days but some of my friends had to wait 2 weeks and that was really stressful. That’s because you couldn’t do anything. So it would be better if you could have them ready and then do your form instead of being blocked by them (successful, female applicant)
- I was often up at 7.30 in the morning – applications opened because we were being told they had to be in asap (unclear) but then I had friends who 2 months later were doing it and still getting on. But it did feel there was pressure and even now I’m still getting emails from Teach Direct sic. that there are still placements. We can start our applications now for September and we’re still in January. The last interview I was on they said ‘there’s only 100 places in the whole of the country so we’ve got to get you now’. It appears that there are still places (unsuccessful, female, mature applicant)
- (Stressful, but) but at the same time if I didn’t have a deadline, I probably still wouldn’t have been applying until now. I might still be thinking I’ll wait till I get my dissertation out the way and then start the application (unsuccessful, female, mature applicant)
- I wish I had taken this year to concentrate on Uni and then applied next year (unsuccessful, female, mature applicant)

● **Impressions and experiences of the type of applicant wanted**

- On the Leicester SCITT it actually says on the website they are looking for males and people from other cultural backgrounds (unclear) and there’s a big Polish community and I’ve volunteered there as well and they said you’re going to be great here and because I speak Polish it was another advantage for me (successful, female applicant)